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'Alexander Nevsky' score brought vividly to life by Orchestra



Prince Alexander Nevsky marshals his troops to victory over the invading German hordes in 1242, in a scene from the 1938 classic.

Peter Dobrin, *Inquirer Classical Music Critic*

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The Philadelphia Orchestra was performing the score of *Alexander Nevsky* live as the film screened long before visual add-ons became the imperative of the orchestra experience they are today. The current performances in Verizon Hall are, in fact, the third coincidence at the orchestra of Prokofiev's music and Eisenstein's film (the others were in 1988 and 1997).

What was so striking Thursday night about the combination was imagining what would have been lost in a recorded-soundtrack iteration. It's not just the three-dimensional sound of real bells pealing from the percussion section as bells wave on screen, or even the mass of chorus sound that accounts for the impact.

But without live forces, details of the relationship between image and music couldn't fully penetrate consciousness. Not all films and scores merit the logistical hurdle (and expense) of such a marriage. When Eisenstein pans across a post-battle tableau of lifeless bodies spilled across the glossy ice, Prokofiev summons the strings - a warm antidote to war. Two distinct messages add up to something more complex that would have been lost had the orchestral sound not been so present.

That scene on frozen Lake Peipus - in which Nevsky defends 13th-century Russia against the Teutonic Knights - is the film's climax, and the music takes control of the listener's pulse. As German invaders advance by the thousands, Prokofiev builds tension with a repeated figure. The explosive point of contact - thousands of bodies crushing into each other - comes almost as a relief.

When the pace is being dictated by events on screen, tempos are no longer under creative control of the podium, and the role of a conductor is diminished. But Stéphane Denève, the Frenchman who has a developing relationship with the orchestra, pulled energy and tenderness into some surprising junctures. Mezzo Michelle DeYoung, the Philadelphia Singers Chorale, and organist Michael Stairs each made impressive contributions in stirring patriotism, offering balm, or, in the case of the organ, a surprising moment of humor.

As if concluding a parable, the chorus hits us over the head at the end: If you die for Russia, you die a noble death. Set to music like this, the message becomes almost beautiful enough to believe.

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Additional performance: Saturday at 8 p.m. in Verizon Hall, Broad and

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